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AUTHOR Hamilton-Lee, Muriel
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses parent participation in education from three perspectives: current research and theoretical positions; a brief historical review of parent involvement and its limitations; and the comprehensive approach used by the School Development Program. The first section reviews past publications that focus on the importance of home-school partnerships. This is followed by a discussion of the historical foundations of parent involvement in schools. The School Development Program's model for home-school partnerships is described as an effort to create a foundation for understanding, trust, and cooperation between low-income minority parents and mainstream, primarily white middle-class school staffs. The program features a three-level approach to involving parents: (1) broad-based parent participation and support for school activities; (2) parental involvement in regular school affairs; and (3) participation of parents in the planning and management team. The paper concludes with a discussion of the long-term benefits of successful home-school partnerships. An extensive bibliography is included. (TE)

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HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS:

THE SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM MODEL

Muriel Hamilton-Lee, Ed.D.

Yale Child Study Center

New Haven, Connecticut

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

A. Introduction

The need for cooperation between schools and the families of the students attending them is an obvious, yet often overlooked, feature of education today (Hess & Holloway, 1984). Parents and teachers share a dual responsibility for shaping the minds, transmitting the values and teaching the skills of one generation to the next. For this reason, the issues of home-school partnership and parent involvement in the formal education of their children have been constant, though often subtle, challenges throughout the history of education in America -- particularly during the past several decades.

In this paper, parent participation in education will be discussed from three perspectives: 1) current research and theoretical positions, 2) a brief historical review of parent involvement and its limitations, and 3) the comprehensive approach utilized by the School Development Program to insure meaningful home-school partnerships.

Current research and theory by and large accept the importance of parent input into their children's education, whether at school or at home. Yet, a review of the history of American education indicates a very mixed record of parent participation and a range of obstacles -- theoretical, political and practical -- which have limited such participation for the great majority of parents. This history also shows that parent-oriented programs have had a multiplicity of facets and a wide range of goals, strategies and ways of measuring their impact. An understanding of both the importance and the complexity of parent-school partnerships serves as a foundation for a description of the 3-tiered School Development Program approach to parent participation and the theoretical base on which it was created.

B. The Importance of Home-School Partnerships

The Carnegie Foundation's 1988 Special Report on An Imperiled Generation concludes that "...schools have an obligation to view parents as co-teachers of their children, not just as adults who sign report cards or show up for open house." (p. 42) Similarly, a recent article in Parents Magazine by Senator Bill Bradley (March 1988) calls for parents to become more involved in their child's education and for schools to become more creative and flexible in their efforts to involve parents. These are but two examples of the rapidly expanding interest in the topic of parent participation in education, an interest which is seen in both scholarly and popular journals and is often translated into some form of practical application in schools all across the nation.

The reasons offered for the importance of parent involvement are varied and often are a combination of philosophical beliefs and practical experience. Davies (1976) cites the broad goal of American citizens to rebuild a sense of competence and confidence in managing their own affairs and institutions in the face of the increasing powerlessness and manipulation caused by our post-industrial society. This yearning for a long-lost sense of democracy and self- or family-determination drives many parents to seek a more active role in the education of their children. Fantini (1975) also speaks of a need for citizens -- parents and teachers alike -- to join together to resist the institutional limitations of an insensitive bureaucracy which usually guides the schooling process in modern American communities. In this line of thinking, parent involvement is one of a number of ways in which parents are encouraged to become more empowered to cope with the increasingly impersonal nature of all social institutions.

Lightfoot's (1978) well-respected study of parent involvement in urban schools adds a second dimension to the importance of such involvement. She notes that the subtle but pervasive tensions between home and school have a long history and numerous social, political and psychological roots, especially when the school staff is primarily white and/or middle class and the student population is primarily black and/or poor. Because parents and teachers must share the task of teaching children and because there is often an unclear boundary line between the two responsibilities, conflicts, jealousies and scape-goating are often the result. To avoid such counterproductive attitudes and concentrate on the goal of education, Lightfoot argues that parents and teachers must begin to understand, trust and cooperate with each other on a much greater level.

A third approach to the need for parent participation is based on the pragmatic reason that it simply helps schools to teach and students to learn (Herman & Yeh, 1983; Thomas, 1980; Fehrmann, et al., 1987). As outlined by Kagan (1984), research has begun to demonstrate that there are several positive and predictable effects of parent involvement: 1) improved student cognitive performance, 2) improved student behavior and attitudes toward school, 3) improved school climate, and 4) improved school-community relations. Henderson (1987) documents several dozen major studies or programs which support the belief that there is a direct and positive correlation between a parent's participation and the educational success of his or her children.

A fourth rationale offered by many for the importance of parent involvement is that parents can often do a better job of parenting and informal teaching at home if the schools reach out to help them and that the improved parenting/teaching skills will better prepare children to be

successful in school. Guided by the success of several early childhood programs (Bronfenbrenner, 1974 and Schaefer, 1972) and compensatory education programs (Gordon, 1968), a number of recent education projects have been based on the theory that children will learn better in school if and when their parents learn the importance of parent initiative and support for learning activities in the home setting (Walberg, 1984; Cochran, et al., 1986).

The most far-reaching discussion of the importance of parent involvement in education is offered by Comer (1980). While acknowledging that home-school partnerships are important in all communities, he presents a specific explanation of the particular importance of such partnerships in minority communities:

> The need for parental participation is greatest in low-income and minority communities or wherever parents feel a sense of exclusion, low self-esteem and/or hopelessness. Parents are the first and most important models and teachers of their children. If parents feel excluded, of little value and hopeless, they will be likely to transmit these attitudes to their children. (p. 126)

He goes on to demonstrate that such attitudes and the student behaviors which come from them can be extremely counterproductive for accomplishing school tasks and goals.

Comer's approach is based on an understanding that education, whether home- or school-based, should not, and cannot, be separated from the overall development of the child. Cognitive development cannot be clearly separated from affective, social or psychological development -- for children at any age, from birth through adolescence and the high school years. Comer's philosophical foundation for active parent involvement

points out the vital importance of teacher-parent cooperation and consistency of values, expectations, and interactions with children in order for those children to be able to learn. Whenever the home and school cultures and behavior patterns are, as Lightfoot terms them, "worlds apart," children cannot be expected to bridge the gaps and overcome the confusion of whom to learn from. The predictable consequence in such situations is that children usually embrace the familiar home culture and reject the unfamiliar school culture, including its academic components and goals. As described below in the implementation discussion, the Comer model of parent involvement seeks to create a number of bridges between home and school for the purpose of achieving educational goals for minority, non-mainstream students by creating a school environment that respects the home culture while it teaches the school culture.

C. Historical Foundations

Until quite recently in the history of public education in America, which had its early development in the mid-19th century, the terms "home-school partnership" and "parent involvement" were virtually unheard of. As described by a noted sociologist (Waller, 1932), schools were traditionally viewed as simply places where children went to learn and become socialized into the norms of their community. Parents and teachers clearly shared in these tasks, but from two very distinct perspectives. Waller states:

> From the ideal point of view, parents and teachers have much in common, in that both, supposedly, wish things to occur for the best interests of the child; but, in fact,

parents and teachers usually live in a condition of mutual distrust and enmity. (p. 68)

Katz (1973) outlines the basic trends which have appeared during the history of education in America from Colonial times through the 1960s. Woven through these trends was an underlying assumption that schools represented a common set of values, attitudes, knowledge and skills which could bring children into the mainstream of adult life. And most families seemed to hold high expectations that this would indeed take place, without their needing to act as constant "watch dogs" over the process. After all, schools and families shared a sense of community, of common values and rules, of accepted authority figures, of clearly-defined goals for the future. Within the narrow limits of each family's community, all of the children were known by all of the adults, and all of the adults were expected to serve as concerned parent substitutes for all of the children. Schools indeed served _in loco parentis_.

As various changes and reforms took place in public education prior to the 1960s, this sense of community concern did not change significantly. The role of parents in these reforms was primarily one of demanding access for their children and their particular community into the existing system (Ravitch, 1974), while the role of educators was generally to improve the professional performance of teachers and principals (Cremin, 1961; Cohen, 1972; Gross, 1985). Criticism of public education, by either parents, teachers or social scientists, has rarely specifically identified a lack of direct parent involvement as a key failure (Greer, 1972; Silberman, 1970; National Commission, 1983). Reform movements, such as the Progressives, the Cult of Efficiency or the Effective Schools Movement, have all claimed to have parental concerns as part of their reason for existing, but did

not, in fact, demand any direct participation of parents either in school affairs or as more active home-based educators of their children.

The first significant move toward parent involvement and a recognition of its importance was during the 1960s' War on Poverty, when the call for "citizen participation" was sounded. Featherstone (1976) outlines the political/social pressures which moved many educational and social service programs to include parents in a number of roles. Programs such as Head Start, Home Start and Follow Through set a new standard for reaching out to parents to gain their assistance for overcoming the educational problems of low-income children (Hess & Holloway, 1984; Valentine & Stark, 1979; McLaughlin & Shields, 1987).

Middle class parents also began demanding more say in the education of their children during the 1960s. In districts across the nation, parents began demanding more flexibility of curriculum, more parental involvement in district level policy-making, more sensitivity to the individual and developmental needs of students and more awareness of local cultural and ethnic traditions (Davies, 1976).

The second thrust toward active parent involvement began with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142). As discussed by Garfunkel (1986), parents of handicapped children sought and obtained the right to be direct partners in the educational decisions made by schools regarding their children. Unfortunately, parents of non-handicapped students were not granted the same rights of direct participation in the educational planning for their children. In spite of school arrangement in which there is an active PTA or PTO and good attendance at school functions, Garfunkel points out that, "while it is thought to be sensible and courteous to keep parents informed, the running of schools has not been the business of parents." (p. 10)

Thus the stage was set, the need was clear, for the development of a new approach to parent-school partnerships which evolved from the work of the Yale Child Study Center's School Development Program during its early years, from 1968 to the late 1970s.

D. SDP Model for Home-School Partnerships

The many programs and studies on parent involvement which have emerged over the past twenty years show a wide range of approaches and outcomes (Moles, 1982; Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1987; Rich, 1985; Kagan & Schraft, 1982; Henderson, 1987). Whereas many of the approaches cite the importance of what parents do with and for their children at home to support the educational goals of the school, it is increasingly clear that schools must do more than simply urge parents to help their children with their home work or limit how much television they watch.

Such efforts at parent participation, though honorable, are bound to fail -- particularly in urban schools serving minority children -- for two reasons: First, they are based on the erroneous assumption that a student's home background is primarily at fault for his or her school problems and limited learning potential; and secondly, such programs have clearly not analyzed why it is important to involve parents in the first place.

The School Development Program's parent program is based on the belief that before any home-school partnership is possible, there must be a sense of trust and mutuality between parents and school personnel and that this attitude must be demonstrated with tangible activities, not merely words or bulletin board posters. Bloom (1980) calls this goal a sense of congruence:

> It is clear that when the home and the school have congruent learning emphases, the child has little difficulty in his later school learning. (p. 385)

Garfunkel (1986) states: "Parents can be 'partners' with teachers if, and only if, there are common values and purposes serving as a foundation for educational programs." (p. 24)

Hess and Holloway (1984) and Clark (1983) also emphasize the importance of continuities between home and school and suggest that the effectiveness of any parent involvement program must be based on shared values and goals.

To develop a high level of trust and congruence between low-income minority parents and mainstream, primarily white and/or middle-class school staffs requires a clear understanding of the historical and psychological realities which have influenced -- and continue to influence-- minority families in America. As described by Lightfoot (1978) and Comer (1972 and 1980), the history of racism and discrimination experienced by Black families throughout their years in this country has left a deep sense of distrust and alienation regarding most institutions. Comer (1972) explains thus: "Alienated, rejected and suppressed people everywhere develop passive-aggressive and anti-social relationships with those in power and control." (p. 178)

Schools are no exception in generating this sense of lingering distrust and alienation. Even those schools that claim to have a positive attitude toward the families of their minority students and offer outreach programs to involve parents, "often ...operate on the rather naive assumption that the children's problems are the result of their parents' inadequacies." (Schraft & Comer, 1979)

In far too many situations (though not all), schools serving minority students show little respect for their students' parents and make no effort

to include them in school affairs -- other than calling them in to deal with a discipline crisis involving their particular child. Communication is one-sided, consisting mainly of rules or criticisms coming from the school to the parent. The not-so-subtle message often seems to be: "you parents are not doing a very good job at raising your children, as demonstrated by their behavior or academic problems at school." And for the parents of children who are not in trouble, there is often no communication at all.

Such condescending or neglectful attitudes are easily labled as racist when the school staff is mainly white and the student population is mainly black. Unfortunately, even when the school staff includes a high proportion of black professionals, some of the same negative attitudes and behaviors can exist.

On the other hand, minority parents are often victims of their own history of school failure and sense of general alienation from all mainstream social institutions. Such feelings, as described above, can lead to a strong reluctance to interacting with school people or (in extreme cases) an active hostility to the sincere efforts of the school to offer good services to their children. Schools are viewed as a necessary evil, mandated by law but clearly outside of a family's control or best interest -- just like all other social services.

Thus, the dilemma: How to create a foundation for understanding, trust and cooperation on which to build parent-school partnerships that can truly make a difference? How to rebuild a sense of community in the midst of a fragmented society in which neither parents nor children have clear-cut values, rules, authority figures or goals for the future?

After several years of discussions and experimental approaches, the School Development Program (SDP) staff found that it was very important to

have specific mechanisms at the school level to turn philosophy into action, to demonstrate trust by actually trusting parents to play active roles in classroom and school management situations.

To overcome the barriers and to create such on-going mechanisms for home-school partnerships, a 3-level approach to involving parents was designed.

Level I: Broad-based parent participation and support.

At the first level, parents are actively, directly and individually urged to attend school activities such as PTA meetings, social events, parent information workshops or student talent shows. Notices about the events are consistently sent to all parents by way of fliers, newsletters, phone calls and even home visits. Children and teachers discuss upcoming events in class and anticipate parents' visits to the school as special, not negative or stressful, occasions. The goal is to involve from 50 to 100% of all the parents at some point during the year.

Level II: Parents involved in regular school affairs.

There are always several areas in a school's regular routines where parents can assist teachers, support staff or the principal in meaningful tasks. Classroom aide, cafeteria aide, library aide or librarian, attendance monitor or office assistant, etc. are examples of daily or weekly positions. Accompanying class field trips, helping with a special curriculum project or presenting a science demonstration are examples of occasional events for parents to help with.

The importance of this level of parent involvement is often overlooked. We believe that the basic climate and tone of interactions of a school are greatly influenced by the presence or absence of parents within the school building on a regular and observable basis. For both symbolic and actual

value, having parents interact with school professionals as colleagues and peers does a great deal to reduce the barriers between them -- both in the eyes of the adults and of the students. Although this level of involvement will probably include only 10 to 20% of the parent population, its impact is considerable.

Because of its importance, SDP schools do not leave this level of involvement to chance or to the self-selection of only parents who are already active. If only a small handful of parents are volunteering, a recruitment program is conducted. If parents seem to be reluctant to volunteer because they lack experience in school work, informal training workshops are provided to discuss the skills needed and to offer reassurance that professional training is usually not necessary for most school assistance tasks. In many instances, the principal and/or a teacher must offer direct, personal encouragement to parents in order to overcome the shyness or anger or disbelief that their presence is actually welcome in the school.

To accomplish Level II and Level III, the school's teachers and administrators must have a genuine openness to including parents. Staff development workshops are often necessary as part of this aspect of SDP implementation.

Level III: Parents on the planning and management team.

The most innovative component of the SDP Parents Program is the direct participation of a few parents in the school's planning and management team (described elsewhere). Parents are responsible for selecting 4 or 5 from their group to meet on a monthly or bi-weekly basis with a representative group of teachers, support personnel and the principal to review and coordinate all aspects of the school's operations -- both social and academic.

Like Level II, Level III has both real and symbolic values for improving home-school partnerships. The real value is that parents are equal partners with teachers and administrators to discuss and cope with the educational, social and management details needed to operate a complex institution. By sharing in the "ownership" of the school, parents have more of a vested interest in the outcomes for all students and are thus willing to invest more of their own time and energy to creating and maintaining trust and collaboration.

The symbolic value is that parents, students and school staff can recognize that all segments are working together for common goals. The worlds of home and school come together because there is a new climate of shared responsibility and power. The sense of community becomes an acknowledged and reachable goal.

E. Implications

Like all innovation, changing the patterns of parent-teacher and home-school relations is not easy. As outlined at the beginning of this paper, there is a long and deep tradition of separation between home and school -- sometimes out of benign neglect, sometimes out of political or professional barriers erected to keep parents out of the way, sometimes out of emotional barriers felt by parents themselves.

The SDP schools that have broken down these barriers have utilized a number of strategies. The first (and probably the most difficult) step is to decide that parent satisfaction and meaningful participation are essential for accomplishing both institutional and human goals. There must be a strong commitment on the part of the school leadership -- both administrative and teacher -- to open the school to real parent input, not just on PTA night twice a-year.

After accomplishing the first step, there are no more specific guidelines. Every school must come up with its own steps, based on its own needs and style. In New Haven, one SDP school has started having parent meetings at 8:45 in the morning, a time when many of its parents are able to attend. Another New Haven school has a volunteer parent librarian, who serves as the main communication link to all other parents. In Prince Georges County, Maryland, an SDP school had a successful mothers' breakfast, then had almost as many fathers turn out several weeks later for the fathers' breakfast.

There are numerous examples of how each school demonstrates its fundamental commitment to home-school partnerships, generally starting with social events, then moving into volunteer activities, then into policy-making activities. It is important to begin with uncomplicated, appealing activities, those which are very likely to be successful. The success of initial efforts will build confidence to attempt more complex, long-term projects and programs.

Research on SDP schools (Haynes, et al., 1987) has shown that the overall model has produced significant improvements in both social and academic areas among student populations. The most pronounced student improvements have occurred in those schools in which the parents program is an active and integral part.

There are also benefits for teachers, principals and other school professionals when the school climate is one of trust and cooperation. Time formerly wasted on conflict and fear of the parents can be re-directed to creative curriculum ideas. Energy formerly wasted by teachers and parents on blaming each other for student failure can be used on collaborative science projects or a student-run talent show or poetry

reading or any number of activities which bring parents and schools together.

Finally, the true importance of developing better home-school partnerships is that, by so doing, parents and school people will finally recognize that this is a vital step, a necessary step for reaching their mutual goal of providing a successful, positive education for every child.

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